GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO

PROEM

Decameron

This is the beginning of the Decameron*, a book also called* Prince Galahalt,* *consisting of one hundred tales told over a period of ten days by seven ladies and three young men.*

It is natural for human beings to feel compassion for those who suffer. This is commendable in everyone, but it is especially required of those who, when they needed comfort, have found it in others. I am one of these, for if anyone ever needed comfort, cherished it, or found relief in it, then that is me. The fact is that from my earliest youth until very recently I burned beyond all measure with an exalted and noble love,* more inflamed perhaps than might be expected from someone of my lowly condition. And although I was praised by discerning people who heard about this and thought the better of me, yet still I could hardly bear it—not indeed because of any cruelty on the part of the lady I loved, but because of the excessive ardour born of an unrestrained appetite which left me dissatisfied with reasonable limits and subjected me to much unnecessary distress. My suffering, however, was greatly relieved by the pleasant conversation and laudable sympathy of certain friends, without which I am certain I should have died. But it has pleased Him who is Himself infinite to make it an immutable law that all earthly things should have an end. My love was so uniquely fervent that no resolve, no advice, no fear of shame or potential danger had the power to destroy or divert it. And yet, as time went by, it waned of its own accord so now all that it has left in the memory is the pleasant feeling that love usually grants to those who do not venture too far out upon its dark waters. As all my troubles have been removed, what used to be a heavy burden now remains only as a delight.

But although my pains are ended, this does not mean that I have forgotten the kindnesses I received from those whose affection towards me led them to feel for my suffering; only death, I believe, will cancel that memory. I am convinced that gratitude stands among those virtues that are to be most highly commended, just as its contrary is to be most blamed. That is why, so as not to appear ungrateful, now that I may say I am free, I mean to offer what little comfort I can in return for the comfort I received. If this does not concern those who actually did help me and who, through their own good sense or good fortune, require no such help themselves, it may at least bring some alleviation to those who are truly in need. They may well feel that my support or comfort, as we might call it, does not add up to much, but I still think that I must try to offer it where the need seems greatest, for that is where it will do most good and be most welcome.

And who on earth will deny that this help, for what it is worth, should be offered to fair ladies far more than to men? Through fear and shame they hide the flames of love within their tender breasts and those who have had that experience know how much stronger than an open blaze is that hidden fire. Moreover, constrained as they are by the wishes, the whims, and the orders of fathers, mothers, brothers, and husbands, they spend most of the time sitting almost idle, cramped up in their rooms, wishing one thing and its opposite in the same moment and brooding over thoughts that cannot possibly be always cheerful. And if their burning desire should give rise to a fit of melancholy, they will continue to be burdened by that distress, unless it is banished by some new concern. Besides this, ladies in love are far less resilient than men who, as we can plainly see, are not disturbed in the same way. When men are afflicted by melancholy or by heavy thoughts, they have many ways of alleviating or overcoming their troubles, for if they feel like it, nothing stops them going out and about to see and hear all kinds of things; they can go hawking, hunting, fishing, riding, gaming, or trading. These are all ways for a man to pull himself together, in part if not completely, distracting him from oppressive thoughts at least for a while. After which, in one way or another, he will find some consolation, or the pain will simply begin to fade.

My intention, therefore, is to provide some compensation for the wrongs done by Fortune which is always so sparing in her support to those who have least strength, as we see in the case of delicate ladies. And it is only to those who are in love that I mean to offer help and distraction, for the rest can get by with needle, spindle, and reel. I intend to tell a hundred tales or fables or parables or histories,* or whatever we choose to call them, recounted over a period of ten days by an honourable group of seven ladies and three young men who came together during

the recent deadly plague.* And I shall add some songs that those ladies sang for the delight of the whole group. The tales will include a variety of love stories, both sweet and bitter, and other events that have been the fruits of Fortune in modern and ancient times. When the ladies I speak of come to read them they will find in equal measure both pleasure in the entertaining subject matter and useful advice in that they may see what actions are to be shunned and what to be pursued. Such things, I believe, cannot occur without the disappearance of all their troubles. If this happens (and may it be God's will!), let them thank Love who, by freeing me from his bonds, has granted me the power to attend to their pleasures.

Here begins the book called Decameron, *known also as the* Book of Prince Galehaut,*
comprising one hundred stories told in the course of ten days by seven ladies and three young men.

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

It is inherently human to show pity to those who are afflicted; it is a quality that becomes any person, but most particularly is it required of those who have stood in need of consolation and have obtained it from others; now if ever there was a man who craved pity or valued it or rejoiced in it, that man was I. From my tenderest youth until today I have been aflame with love, with the loftiest and most noble love: maybe it has far exceeded anything suited to my inferior condition, speaking for myself, although persons of discretion have commended me for it and formed an undeservedly high opinion of me once they have been apprised of it. This love has, none the less, proved wellnigh unendurable, not because my beloved has rebuffed me—far from it—but because my disordered appetite has ignited in my heart an uncontrollable fire which has refused to leave me satisfied with moderate expectations but has caused me constant and quite needless vexation. In this unhappy state I derived so much refreshment from pleasant conversation with friends and their admirable support, I cannot doubt but that if I'm still alive it is thanks to them. My love, then, was passionate beyond all measure; no amount of good resolutions, wiser counsels, blatant humiliations, no conceivable risks had ever been able to destroy or temper it, until eventually, as it pleased Him who is infinite but has imposed on everything here below the inflexible law of transience, it began to wane of its own accord. Now all that survives of it in my heart is the joy it is inclined to afford to those who do not launch out too far across its dark waters. Thus all the pain of it has now been remitted and I feel that what was once a burden has become a pleasure.

Well, my sorrows may be at an end, but this has not made me forgetful of past favours accorded me by persons who could not bear to see me suffer, such were their kindly feelings towards me: I do believe that nothing short of death will ever erase the memory. And as gratitude is in my view the most commendable of virtues, and its opposite a crying shame, to avoid appearing ungrateful now that I can consider myself a free man again, I have decided to discharge my obligation, within the limits of my competence, by offering some pleasant distraction to those in need of it—even if not to those who came to my support, for conceivably by good management (or good luck) they can do without it. True enough, what I am to provide may be (and surely is) only the tiniest crumb of comfort to those in distress; none the less I feel it should be offered where the need appears the greatest, because that way it will be all the more useful and will prove all the more welcome.

And who is going to deny that this offering, such as it is, should properly be devoted to the fair sex very much in preference to the men? It is women who timorously and bashfully conceal Love's flame within their tender breasts; and those who have had experience of it know well enough how much harder it is to control the suppressed than the open flame. Moreover, circumscribed as women are by whatever it is their fathers and mothers, their brothers, their husbands desire or require of them, they spend most of their time within the narrow confines of their bedchambers; here they sit in relative idleness, torn between yes and no as they brood on all manner of things, not all of which can procure them unalloyed happiness. And if Love's craving leaves their thoughts tinged with sadness, they are condemned to remain gloomy unless such thoughts are driven out by some fresh distraction. Besides which women have anyway far less endurance than men. Now we have only to look to see that men in love meet with nothing of this kind. If a man is down in the dumps or out of sorts, he has any number of ways to banish his cares or make them tolerable: he can go out and about at will, he can hear and see all sorts of things, he can go hawking and hunting, he can fish or ride, gamble or pursue his business interests. The effect of

such activities will be to improve his spirits to a greater or lesser degree and stave off depression for a while at any rate, after which somehow or other he obtains comfort or else the problem recedes.

Now since Fortune has tended to be at her most niggardly in that one quarter where strength has proved the most defective, as is evident in the gentle sex, I will to some degree make amends for her sin: to afford assistance and refuge to women in love—the rest have all they want in their needles, their spools and spindles—I propose to tell a hundred tales (or fables or parables or stories or what you will). They were narrated—as will transpire—in the course of ten days by a goodly company of seven ladies and three young men which assembled during the last incidence of the plague. There will also be a few songs which the aforementioned ladies sang for their pleasure. The stories will portray the happy and hapless fortunes of love and other hazards of chance, whether these occurred in our day or in olden times. And the womenfolk to whom I have been alluding will be able, as they read them, to derive entertainment from the amusing events there described and, equally, helpful advice, for they will contrive to grasp what is to be avoided and what to pursue—none of which will take effect (so I believe) without raising their spirits. And if, God willing, spirits *are* raised, let the ladies give thanks to Love: by relieving me of his bonds, he has permitted me to attend to their pleasure.

Here begins the first day of the Decameron, *wherein the Author sets forth the occasion that brought together for conversation the persons shortly to be described. Under the reign of Pampinea, the topic for story-telling is at the choice of each person.*

Every time I stop to consider your natural inclination to pity, most gracious ladies, I recognize that you will find the opening of this present work abhorrent and distressing; for so is the painful recapitulation of the recent deadly plague, which occasioned hardship and grief to everyone who witnessed it or had some experience of it, and which marks the introduction of my work. I should be sorry, however, if you let this discourage you from reading on, as if to do so were to condemn you to unremitting sighs and tears. You are to look upon this grim opening as travellers on foot confront a steep, rugged mountain: beyond it lies a most enchanting plain which they appreciate all the more for having toiled up and down the mountain first. And just as sorrow will come to displace the most abundant happiness, so will the arrival of joy put paid to sorrow. This brief affliction (I call it brief for it is contained in not all that many letters) will quickly give place to the sweet relief already promised you: were I not to mention it, you might perhaps never have expected it after an opening such as this. The fact is, had I been able to find some suitable alternative path by which to bring you to where I want, other than along this steep one, I should willingly have done so; but as I could not have explained the reasons underlying what you are about to read unless I broached this matter of the plague, I find myself virtually obliged to write about it.

The era of the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God had arrived at the year 1348 when the deadly plague reached the noble city of Florence, of all Italian cities the most excellent. Whether it was owing to the action of the heavenly bodies or whether, because of our iniquities, it was visited upon us mortals for our correction by the righteous anger of God, this

pestilence, which had started some years earlier in the Orient, where it had robbed countless people of their lives, moved without pause from one region to the next until it spread tragically into the West. It was proof against all human providence and remedies, such as the appointment of officials to the task of ridding the city of much refuse, the banning of sick visitors from outside, and a good number of sanitary ordinances; equally unavailing were the humble petitions offered to the Lord by pious souls not once but countless times, whether in the course of processions or otherwise. As the said year turned to spring, the plague began quite prodigiously to display its harrowing effects. Here it did not develop as it had done in the East, where death was inevitable in anyone whose symptoms were a loss of blood through the nose. Its first sign here in both men and women was a swelling in the groin or beneath the armpit, growing sometimes in the shape of a simple apple, sometimes in that of an egg, more or less: a bubo was the name commonly given to such a swelling. Before long this deadly bubo would begin to spread indifferently from these points to crop up all over; the symptoms would develop then into dark or livid patches that many people found appearing on their arms or thighs or elsewhere; these were large and well separated in some cases, while in others, they were a crowd of tiny spots. And just as the bubo had been, and continued to be, a sure indication of fatal disease, so were these blotches for those on whom they appeared. No physician's prescriptions, no medicine seemed of the slightest benefit as a cure for this disease. In addition to those trained in medicine, the number of men and women who claimed to be physicians without having studied the subject at all grew immensely; however, whether it was that the nature of the malady would not permit it, or because doctors were unable to discover its origins and therefore could not apply the proper remedy, not only did few people recover but indeed nearly all the sick would succumb within three days of the above-mentioned symptoms' first appearance; some died sooner, some later, and the majority with no fever, nothing.

And the plague gathered strength as it was transmitted from the sick to the healthy through normal intercourse, just as fire

catches on to any dry or greasy object placed too close to it. Nor did the trouble stop there: not only did the healthy incur the disease and with it the prevailing mortality by talking to or keeping company with the sick—they had only to touch the clothing or anything else that had come into contact with or been used by the sick and the plague evidently was passed to the one who handled those things. You will be quite amazed by what I am about to tell you: were it not that many people witnessed it and I saw it with my own eyes, I would never have dared believe it, still less set it down in writing, even if I had had it on the most reliable authority. So potent was the contagion as it was passed on that it was transmitted not only between one person and the next: many a time it quite clearly went further than that, and if some animal other than a human touched an object belonging to a person who was sick or had died of the plague, the animal was not merely infected with it but fell dead in no time at all. As I have just mentioned, I saw this for myself one day in particular: the rags of a pauper who had died of the plague had been tossed out into the street and two pigs happened upon them; they nosed about them with their snouts, as pigs do, then took them in their jaws and shook them this way and that; it was not long before they fell into convulsions, as if they had swallowed poison, and then dropped dead on top of the rags they had so haplessly snatched up.

This sort of thing, as well as many another that was similar to it if not worse, produced in the survivors all manner of terrors and suspicions all tending to the same solution, and a very heartless one it was: they would keep their distance from the plague-victims, and from their chattels too, thus hoping to preserve their own skins. There were some who inclined to the view that if they followed a temperate life-style and eschewed all extravagance they should be well able to keep such an epidemic at bay. So they would form into a group and withdraw on their own to closet themselves in a house free of all plague-victims; here they would enjoy the good life, partaking of the daintiest fare and the choicest of wines—all in the strictest moderation—and shunning all debauchery; they would refrain from speaking to anyone or from gleaning any news from outside that related to deaths or plague-victims—rather

did they bask in music and such other pleasures as were at their disposal. Others found the contrary view more enticing, that the surest remedy to a disease of this order was to drink their fill, have a good time, sing to their hearts' content, live it up, give free rein to their appetites—and make light of all that was going on. This was their message, this their practice so far as they were able; day and night would find them in one tavern or another, soaking up the booze like sponges, and carousing all the more in other people's houses the moment word got out that that's where the fun was to be had. This was easy enough to do because everyone had let his property go, just as he had let himself go, as if there was to be no tomorrow. Most houses therefore lay open to all comers, and people would walk in off the streets and make themselves at home just as if they owned the place. And while they pursued this brutish behaviour they still took every care to avoid all contact with the sick.

Now with our city in such a sorry state, the laws of God and men had lost their authority and fallen into disrespect in the absence of magistrates to see them enforced, for they, like everyone else, had either succumbed to the plague or lay sick, or else had been deprived of their minions to the point where they were powerless. This left everyone free to do precisely as he pleased. There were many others who adhered to a middle way between these two, neither following the frugal regimen of the first group nor letting themselves go in the drunken, dissolute life-style of the second. They partook of their fill but no more and, instead of shutting themselves away, they would go about holding flowers to their noses or fragrant herbs, or spices of various kinds, in the belief that such aromas worked wonders for the brain (the seat of health), for the atmosphere was charged with the stench of corpses, it reeked of sickness and medication. Others there were who were totally ruthless and no doubt chose the safest option: there was in their view no remedy to equal that of giving the plague a very wide berth. On this premise any number of men and women deserted their city and with it their homes and neighbourhoods, their families and possessions, heedless of anything but their own skins, and made for other people's houses or for their

country estates at any rate, as though the wrath of God, in visiting the plague on men to punish their iniquity, was never going to reach out to where *they* were; as though it was meant to harry only those remaining within their city walls, as though not a soul was destined to remain alive in the city, as though its last hour had come.

And even if not all of them died who clung to these various persuasions, not all of them lived either; in each of these groups many fell sick, here, there, and everywhere, and mindful of the example these people had given when they were still in good health, those whose health remained sound left them to languish unattended. One citizen avoided the next, there was scarcely a man who would take care of his neighbour, kinsmen would seldom if ever call on each other, and even then would keep their distance—but this was not all: men and women alike were possessed by such a visceral terror of this scourge that a man would desert his own brother, uncle would forsake his nephew, sister her brother, and often a wife her husband. What is more, believe it or not, mothers and fathers would avoid visiting and tending their children, they would virtually disown them. Therefore those who fell sick—and they were a number beyond counting, of either sex—had no recourse beyond the charity of their friends (the few they had) or the cupidity of their servants: these were few and far between, even though they were recruited with absurdly inflated wages, and comprised men and women of the commonest sort, for the most part totally untrained, whose ministrations amounted to little more than handing the patient such objects as he requested or watching him die. Quite often in the course of his duties the servant lost his life along with his wages. Now this desertion of the sick by their neighbours, their families and friends, and the scarcity of servants, led to a practice hitherto unheard of: when a woman fell ill, she could be the neatest, prettiest, most refined of ladies, but she made no bones about being attended by a male, any male, never mind his age, and displaying to him any part of her anatomy quite without embarrassment, just as she would do with another of her sex, if her invalid condition required it. Conceivably this might have occasioned a certain lapse from the path of virtue among those women who sub-

sequently recovered their health. At all events many people succumbed who might have pulled through had they obtained help. In the absence of the sort of ministrations the sick required but could not obtain, and as the pestilence continued unabating, the number of people who died in the city night and day was impossible to credit on hearsay, let alone on witnessing it. Thus the survivors were virtually forced to engage in practices totally at variance with the traditional Florentine way of life.

It had been the custom—as we see it is today—for the female relatives and neighbours to assemble in the house of the deceased and join with his nearest and dearest in mourning over him; outside the house the menfolk would foregather—the dead man's kinsmen and neighbours and a great number of townsmen—while such clergy as suited the man's social standing would arrive; he would be carried on the shoulders of his peers to the church he had chosen before his death, with all the funeral rites of candles and dirges. Most if not all of these practices were suspended as the plague's ravages became more ruthless, only to be superseded by what was hitherto unheard of: not merely did many people die bereft of their attendant feminine company, all too many passed away without so much as a single witness. Barely a handful were accorded the benefit of seeing their dear ones in floods of compassionate tears: far from it, the new order called for quips and jollity more suited to a festive gathering. The womenfolk had largely suppressed their natural pity and become well practised in this new frivolity to assure their own survival. Seldom were there more than ten or a dozen neighbours to escort the body of the deceased to church. Nor would the corpse be borne on the shoulders of prominent and distinguished citizens: the bier would be taken in charge by a tribe of pallbearers, people of the commonest sort who liked to call themselves undertakers and who fulfilled the function against payment in cash. They would bend their hastening steps, not to the church appointed by the deceased before his death, but to the nearest one, more often than not, preceded by maybe a half-dozen clerics holding the odd candle—sometimes with none at all. With the help of the pallbearers they would drop the corpse into the nearest

available tomb that had space, without too much effort being wasted on a lengthy or solemn requiem. If you examined the situation of the common people, and even that of much of the middle class, it looked a great deal bleaker still: they stayed at home for the most part, whether it was hope or sheer poverty that kept them there, and caught the plague by the thousand right there in their neighbourhood, day after day; in the absence of any help at all, paid or otherwise, they were virtually all beyond saving. Many there were who passed away in the street, by day as by night, while scores of those who died indoors only made their neighbours aware of their decease by the stench of their decaying corpses; the whole city was full of these and others dying all over the place.

Neighbours tended all to follow the same procedure, motivated as they were by fear of being tainted by the corpses no less than by kindness towards the dead. With the aid of bearers if they could find any, otherwise on their own, they would carry the corpses into the street and lay them down outside the front door; anyone who took a turn in the street, in the morning especially, would have noticed any number of them. Then they would send for coffins (unless these proved unobtainable, in which case planks would have to serve); and on more than one occasion a single bier would be loaded with two or three corpses—it happened frequently, and you could have counted a good number that bore away wife and husband, or two or three brothers, or father and son, and so on. There were countless occasions, too, when a couple of priests would go with a crucifix to fetch somebody only to find that three or four groups of pallbearers had fallen in behind them with their biers, so that whereas the priests were expecting to have one deceased person to bury, they might find themselves with half a dozen or more. Which is not to suggest that these obsequies were attended by any tears, any display or candles, any company: things had reached the point where the dying received no more consideration than the odd goat would today. What was inescapably apparent was that if the occasional minor disaster that occurs in the normal course had failed to teach patience to the wise, the sheer scale of the prevailing evil had taught even the simplest soul a degree of placid resignation.

As there was not sufficient consecrated ground in which to bury the vast number of corpses that arrived at every church day after day and practically hour by hour, least of all while any effort had been made to give each person his own burial plot in accordance with age-old custom, enormous pits were dug in the graveyards, once saturation point had been reached, and the new arrivals were dropped into these by the hundred; here they were packed in layers, the way goods are stowed in a ship's hold, and each layer would get a thin covering of earth until the pit was filled up.

Before I go into yet more detail about the afflictions our city underwent in those days, I should only add that if the townsfolk were having such a ghastly time of it, the neighbouring countryfolk were spared none of the rigours. To say nothing of the market-towns, which were like the city if on a smaller scale, in the remote villages and out in the fields the labourers, poor penniless wretches, and their households died like brute beasts rather than human beings; night and day, with never a doctor to attend them, no sort of domestic help, they would pass away, some indoors, others out on the roads or among their crops. As a result they, like the townsfolk, became feckless in their habits, neglecting their affairs and their possessions; indeed, far from encouraging their animals, their fields, their earlier labours to bear fruit, they all bent their best efforts to dissipating whatever came to hand, as though they were simply awaiting the day on which they could see they were going to die. Which is why the oxen, the donkeys, the sheep and goats, the pigs and hens, even the faithful hounds were driven off and went wandering at leisure through the fields where the harvest stood abandoned, not gleaned, not gathered in. Many of them behaved like perfectly rational beings, browsing to their hearts' content all day and at nightfall returning replete to their quarters without any herdsmen in attendance.

Leaving the countryside and returning to the city, what more is there to say but that, what with the inordinate wrath of Heaven and doubtless also to some extent the cruelty of men, between March and July more than a hundred thousand human beings are in all certainty believed to have lost their lives within the walls of Florence: this as a result partly of the sheer

inexorability of the plague, partly of the terror possessing the survivors, which prevented them from attending and ministering to the sick in their need? Before the plague struck, who would have believed the city even numbered that many inhabitants? Oh think of all the great palaces, the fine houses and gorgeous mansions that once boasted full households, now bereft of their masters and mistresses, abandoned by all, down to the humblest menial! Imagine all those memorable family names, those vast estates and egregious fortunes left without a legitimate heir! How many gallant men, how many fair women and bright young people whom anybody would have pronounced among the fittest—even physicians as eminent as Galen, Hippocrates, and Aesculapius* would have—sat down to breakfast with their families and friends only to find themselves dining that night with their forbears in the next world!

It gives me no pleasure to go raking over all these tribulations, and I propose to make no mention of whatever may suitably be passed over in silence. Now I have it on good authority that as our city was in these straits and practically deserted, one Tuesday morning seven young ladies assembled in the hallowed church of Santa Maria Novella.* They were virtually the only people present to hear the Divine Office, and were dressed in mourning as the times required. They were united in a bond of friendship or blood, or else they were neighbours, and the eldest was not past 28, the youngest not less than 18 years of age, and each one of them was gifted with good birth, beauty, charm, sagacity, and a fetching innocence. I should give them their real names if I had not a valid reason to avoid doing so, and this is that I shall be reporting what they said and what they listened to, and should not wish any of them to feel embarrassed on this account in the future: in those days a good deal of licence was accorded not merely to their age-group (for the reasons stated) but even to their elders, whereas today a certain austerity once more prevails. Besides, the vindictive are ready to take issue with the most blameless of lives and I don't want to offer them any grounds to impugn the good ladies' morals with scandalous talk. So, in order to give an account of what each of them said without causing embarrassment, I will provide them with names that to a

greater or lesser degree reflect each one's character: the first and eldest we shall call Pampinea, the second Fiammetta, the third Philomena, the fourth one Emilia, the fifth Lauretta, the sixth Neiphile, and the last we shall justifiably call Elissa.*

These ladies assembled, by chance more than by design, in a certain part of the church, drew up their chairs in a circle and, after giving vent to a few sighs, left off telling their beads and began discussing life from various angles. And as after a while they fell silent, Pampinea spoke up and said: 'There is no offence in putting one's brain to a legitimate use—as both you and I will have heard any number of times—and it's only sensible for us, born as we are into this life, to do all we can to foster and protect it. Indeed, this is allowed even to the extent that people have on occasion committed murder without incurring blame, when this has been to protect their own lives. Now if this is permitted by law—and the law is, after all, responsible for the common weal—then we and all others are only the more entitled to take such steps as will harm no one else in order to assure our own survival. The more I ponder what we've been up to this morning, and all these other mornings besides, and think over the discussions we keep having, the more I realize that we're all of us not a little anxious about our safety—you must have realized this too. It's hardly surprising. What *does* surprise me, though, considering that we all share a woman's feelings, is that none of us is taking any precautions against that which we've every reason to be afraid of. Here we carry on, if you ask me, for all the world as if we had an urge or a duty to testify to the number of corpses carried off for burial, or to listen out to ensure that these friars (whose numbers are depleted practically to zero) are singing the office at the proper times, or maybe to display to anyone we meet the variety and depths of our afflictions, as witness our attire. And if we step out of here what do we see? Corpses or invalids being carried about. Or people running about the city with brazen impudence, people whom the Law banished for their misdeeds, but who see now that those who represent the Law are either indisposed or deceased, and treat it with contempt. We see the dregs of the population calling themselves undertakers all in a state of ferment and smelling

blood as they go charging about on horseback in all directions, and jeer at our misfortunes with scurrilous songs. All we ever hear is: "The So-and-sos are all dead", or "So-and-so's at his last gasp"; we'd hear weeping on all sides if there were anyone left to weep. And I don't know what it's like for you going home, but in my case I go back to find nobody left but my maid—and we once were such a large household. And I find it terrifying, my hair stands on end—I can feel it—because anywhere I go about the house, anywhere I stop, I fancy I see the ghosts of those who've died, and they don't look the way I've known them, they look utterly ghastly, heaven knows why. So I don't feel the least bit comfortable whether I'm in here or outside or at home, and it's all the worse because we seem to be the only ones who've stayed on—anyone else who has a little money and somewhere to go to, as we have, has made off. As for them, if any of them are still left, how often have I heard and seen them enjoying the time of their lives, day and night, alone or in a crowd, simply catering to their lusts without the smallest concern for moral scruples. And it's not only people free of religious ties I'm talking about; even those in the monastic orders have convinced themselves that what's permissible to everyone else is equally permissible to them too; so they break their vows and surrender to the lusts of the flesh, as though this is a way of escape: they have grown remiss and debauched. Now if this is the situation, and quite clearly it is, what are we doing here? What are we waiting for? What are we hoping for? What's making us so much lazier and more casual than the rest of the city when it comes to taking care of ourselves? Do we set a smaller value on ourselves? Do we imagine that our bodies and souls are more solidly linked together than other people's are, so we don't have to worry about any harm coming to us? Well how very wrong we are, and what an absurd thing to believe!—we have only to stop and think of all those young people of either sex who've succumbed to this cruel plague.

'Well, I don't know if it seems to you the way it seems to me, but what if the worst befalls us simply because we're too supine and lackadaisical to avoid it by looking after ourselves? In my view the best thing we can do in our present situation

is to leave the city, as so many have done before us and are still doing, and go to stay on our country estates—each one of us has a good choice of these. We would avoid like grim death the disgraceful example set by other people and live virtuously in the country, having a good time and making merry as best we may without overdoing anything. There we can hear the birds sing, and watch the hills and plains turn green; there are fields like a sea of waving corn, and all sorts of trees, and a nice open sky to look at: the heavens may be scowling at us but they still won't refuse us their glimpse of eternal beauty—and that's a great deal more beauty than we'll ever find staring at the empty buildings in this city! The air is much fresher, there's far more of all the basic necessities of life that one needs at a time like this, and not as many difficulties to contend with. Of course the labourers in the fields are dying just as the townsfolk are; but as there are fewer houses and fewer people about than we have here in town, it's all that much less distressing. Besides, we're not deserting anybody, if I'm not mistaken; it would be far truer to say that it's we who have been deserted—our families have abandoned us alone to all this misery, just as if we didn't belong to them, for they've either died or run away from death. No one will blame us, therefore, if we do as I suggest; if we don't, the likely result will be sheer misery and possibly death. So the best thing we can do, if you agree, is to take our maids and have our things sent after us—whatever we need—and stop here today, there tomorrow, and enjoy ourselves with the best of whatever the times will provide. Let's stay away until we can see what the heavens have in store—unless death catches up with us first. Remember, if we go away to live virtuously we've far less to be ashamed about than those women have who stay behind to lead sordid lives.'

After listening to Pampinea, the other ladies did not simply applaud her proposal but were only too ready to adopt it and immediately began to discuss how to put it into effect, as if the moment they got up from their seats they were to set out on their way. But Philomena, who was nothing if not shrewd, had this to say: 'Pampinea is absolutely right in what she says, but don't let's rush into it the way you all seem about to do.

Bear in mind that we're all women, and none of us is too young to be aware that women on their own have no idea how to go about things sensibly and need a man to guide them. Look how capricious we are, how restive, suspicious, timid, and faint-hearted! So I can't help worrying, if we commit ourselves purely to our own resources, that we'll all be going our several ways a good deal sooner than we'd need to, and looking a bit shabby, what's more. Shouldn't we do well to attend to this matter before we get going?'

'True it is that men are women's leaders', observed Elissa, 'and we seldom have reason to flatter ourselves on our achievements unless men have taken charge. But where are we going to find these men? We all know that most of our menfolk are dead, and those still alive have joined one group or another to escape the same thing we want to escape from. How are we to know where they've got to? Picking up strange men would be not at all suitable. So if we want to look after ourselves we'll have to see to organizing our life in such a way that we enjoy a happy, restful time without giving scandal or offence.'

While the young women were engaged in these discussions, who should come into the church but three young men, of whom the youngest was aged not less than 25. Being in love, nothing could dampen, let alone extinguish, their ardour—not the present adversity, not the loss of their friends and kinsmen, nor even fear for their own safety. The first was called Pamphilo, the second Philostrato, and the last Dioneo,* each one a charming young gentleman, and they had come in search of their loved ones for the consolation of their company in these disastrous times. As it happened, these ladies of theirs were among the seven we have mentioned, while the other four had ties of kinship with some of them.

The women noticed them almost at the same moment that they were spotted by the men, and Pampinea remarked with a smile: 'Look at the good luck attending the start of our venture! Here we are presented with three dashing young men who have their wits about them: they'll be only too glad to be our leaders and servants if we're prepared to engage them.'

At this, Neiphile blushed scarlet, for she was one of those being courted by one of the young men. 'For Heaven's sake,

Pampinea, think what you're saying!' she cried. 'I readily admit that there's not one word of criticism to be said against any of them. I'm sure they're fully up to this task and greater ones besides. And of course they would provide good and wholly unexceptionable company for us and indeed for women a great deal more beautiful and alluring than we are. But it's widely known that they're in love with some of us. I fear that we'd occasion scandal and censure through no fault of theirs or ours if we took them with us.'

'Nonsense!' said Philomena. 'So long as my conduct is above reproach and I have nothing on my conscience, I don't care what anyone says—God and the truth will fight my battle for me. If only they'll be ready to come! As Pampinea remarked, we could honestly say we'd be setting out with luck on our side.'

This argument of hers effectively silenced them and they all spoke in favour of calling the men over: they would tell them of the plan they had formed and invite them to keep them company on this expedition. So without another word, Pampinea, who was related to one of the young men, got up and went over to them as they stood watching; she greeted them cheerfully, apprised them of their proposal, and asked them, speaking for all the others, if they would consent to accompany them in a spirit of pure brotherly affection. The men's first thought was that they were being teased, but when they could see that Pampinea was speaking in earnest they answered that they were most cheerfully at their service. And without wasting a moment, they had, before leaving the church, arranged all that needed preparing prior to their departure. And when everything necessary had been prepared to the last detail and they had sent word ahead to their destination, the ladies left the city the following morning (Wednesday) at crack of dawn, and set out accompanied by a few of their maids and by the young men with three of their manservants. They had to go barely two miles to reach their intended stopping-place.

The place was set back a little from every main road and occupied a knoll; its variegated shrubs and leafy greenery were a pleasure to the eye. Perched atop the knoll was a mansion built round a lovely spacious courtyard; it comprised loggias,

public rooms, and bedrooms, each one of which was exquisitely decorated with charming paintings. The house was ringed with splendid gardens and meadows, there were wells of the freshest water and cellars filled with the choicest of wines—not really the thing for sober, self-respecting ladies so much as for the enlightened tippler. On arrival the party was not a little delighted to find the whole place swept, the beds made up, flowers in season everywhere, and the floors strewn with rushes.

They sat down the moment they arrived and were addressed by Dioneo, the most engaging of young men and something of a wit: 'It's your good sense, ladies, rather than our providence that has brought us here. I don't know what you're proposing to do with your cares; mine I left at the city gates as I came out with you a while ago. So either you must be ready to join me in singing and laughing and living it up—without prejudice, of course to your dignity—or else you must give me leave to return to the city of affliction and resume my worries again.'

Pampinea answered cheerfully, as if she too had rid herself of all her cares: 'How right you are, Dioneo: the thing is to have a good time, that's been the whole point of leaving all that misery behind us. But anything that's going to last must have prescribed limits, and it seems to me—and I'm the one who first opened the discussion out of which this nice company has originated—it seems to me that, if we want to prolong our enjoyment, we shall have to appoint one of our number as our leader, someone to honour and obey as our sovereign; that person's entire concern will have to be to assure us of happy days. Now to ensure that each one of us experiences both the cares and the privileges of office, weighing the one against the other and finding therefore no occasion for envy, I suggest that the burden and the honour be bestowed upon each of us for a day. Let all of us choose the first one, and let the subsequent ones be decided each evening at six by whoever has exercised sovereignty for that day. The sovereign shall decide upon the duration of his or her office, and shall establish how and where we are to dispose of our time.'

These words won general approval and Pampinea was unanimously elected queen for the first day; then Philomena ran

quickly to a laurel bush, plucked a few sprigs, and turned them into an impressive and dignified garland, for she had often heard people remark on the honour which attached to its leaves and what dignity they conferred on the person who was deservedly garlanded with them. So she placed the garland on Pampinea's head, and for the duration of their companionship this garland remained the outward sign of royal imperium.

Pampinea, now appointed queen, sent for the young men's attendants and for the ladies' maids, who numbered four, and enjoined silence on everybody; when she had obtained it, she spoke as follows: 'I will be the first to set you all an example to ensure that we conduct our affairs in an orderly and agreeable manner, constantly improving our situation and avoiding any taint of scandal, and that we thus continue for as long as we wish. So I will start by appointing Dioneo's man Parmeno* as my major-domo: to him will I commit the entire charge and responsibility for our household, and he shall supervise our table. Pamphilo's man Sirisco shall be our steward and treasurer, and shall answer to Parmeno. Tindaro shall wait upon Philostrato and the other two young men as valet of the bedchamber at such times as the other two servants are prevented from doing so by their own duties. My Misia and Philomena's Licisca shall serve in the kitchens, devoting themselves to the preparation of such dishes as Parmeno commands of them. As for Lauretta's girl Chimera and Fiammetta's Stratilia, we will make them responsible for the ladies' rooms and for the cleanliness of those rooms in which we foregather. Furthermore it is our wish and command that all of you, if you value our favour, shall forbear—wherever you go, whencesoever you come, whatever you see or hear—to bring us back any news from outside unless it be cheerful.'

These orders briefly imparted to everyone's approval, Pampinea stood up and genially observed: 'Here we have gardens, meadows, and other quite enchanting corners: so off you go and amuse yourselves until the clock strikes nine—then be back here and we'll eat while it's still cool.'

Thus dismissed by their new queen, the young men and pretty ladies, a happy band, sauntered off through one of the gardens, discussing pleasant topics, fashioning themselves nice

garlands out of various kinds of foliage, and singing amorous snatches. They were occupied in this fashion during the interval proposed by the queen, after which they returned to the house, where they saw that Parmeno had made a diligent start to his duties: entering a ground-floor room, they found the tables laid with snow-white linens and glasses that glistened like silver, and the whole place embellished with sprigs of broom. At the queen's behest, they rinsed their hands and took their places as Parmeno had appointed. They were served the most exquisite fare and the finest of wines, the three menservants providing discreet attendance. Such things raised everyone's spirits, for they betokened beauty and measure, and they dined to the accompaniment of cheerful banter. When the tables were cleared, as all the ladies, and the young men too, were familiar with round dances, while several of them were excellent singers and musicians, the queen sent for the musical instruments; at her bidding Dioneo took a lute, Fiammetta a viol, and they struck up a mellow dance. The servants were sent off to take their own meal and the queen and her sisters stepped out slowly with the two young men on a round dance. After this they sang charming, gay songs. Thus they employed themselves until the queen felt it was time for them to retire for their siesta; so she dismissed them all and the three men withdrew to their rooms, separate from the women's. These they found with the beds neatly made up and as replete with flowers as the dining-room; the women found the same in their rooms, so they undressed and went to bed.

Not long after three o'clock had struck the queen got up and had the other ladies all awoken, and the men too, for, so she claimed, too much sleep in the daytime is harmful. Off they went into a meadow of tall green grass and out of the sun; here they could feel a gentle breeze, and they all sat down on the grass in a circle, as the queen required. 'As you see', she told them, 'the sun is high, the heat intense; the only sound is that of the crickets in the olive trees. There's certainly no sense in our going off anywhere at present. It's lovely and cool here and there are games tables with chess sets, as you see, and you can all amuse yourselves as the fancy takes you. But with these games, one player's bound to get upset, which is

not all that much fun for the other or for the onlookers; so if you follow my advice, we shall spend this sultry part of the day not playing games but telling stories: in this way one narrator entertains the entire company. By the time you've each told a little tale the sun will be on the decline, the heat will have abated, and we can go and enjoy ourselves wherever you feel like. So if you agree with my suggestion, let us do it—I'm perfectly ready to meet your wishes. If this is not what you feel like doing, let's go off until six and all follow our own inclinations.'

They all, men and women alike, spoke in favour of the story-telling.

'Very well', said the queen, 'if that is your wish, I shall on this first day leave you all free to choose whatever topic you prefer.'

She turned to Pamphilo, who was sitting on her right, and kindly invited him to make a start with a story of his own. On hearing the summons, Pamphilo promptly addressed his attentive audience in the words that follow.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

3 *Prince Galehaut*: 'Lord of the Far Isles' in the prose *Lancelot*, who helped Lancelot woo Guinevere: Boccaccio is referring here to the passage in Dante, *Inferno* V, where Francesca brands the *Lancelot* romance as a an erotic go-between.

14 *Galen, Hippocrates, and Aesculapius*: two Greek doctors of antiquity, proverbial for their skill by the Middle Ages, and the Greek god of medicine.

14 *Santa Maria Novella*: major Florentine church, famous at the time for its preachers.

15 *Pampinea . . . Elissa*: *Pampinea*: 'sprouting' or 'lively' (also found in *Comedia delle ninfe*); *Fiammetta*: 'little flame' (also found in several of his earlier works, and heroine of the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*); *Philomena*: 'songstress' or perhaps 'beloved' (also found in *Filostrato*); *Emilia*: 'flatterer' (also found in *Teseida*); *Lauretta*: 'little laurel' (Petrarch's *senhal*, or symbolic beloved, in the *Canzoniere*); *Neiphile*: 'new love' (generic reference to *stilnovismo*—see Introduction); *Elissa*: other name for Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid*.

18 *Pamphilo . . . Dioneo*: *Pamphilo*: 'all love' or 'love all' (the fickle lover in the *Elegia di madonna Fiammetta*); *Philostrato*: 'love-stricken' (the unlucky protagonist of the *Filostrato*); Dioneo: 'venereal' (reference to the erotic allegories of the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*).

21 *Parmeno*: this and the other servants' names are traditionally 'literary' names for plebeian characters in Roman comedy and satire.

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD

I do believe that I have wholly accomplished the task I undertook, at the opening of this book, to fulfil; this have I done with the help of divine grace, so it seems to me, and thanks to the encouragement of your prayers, most noble young ladies to whose solace I have devoted myself by engaging in so extensive a labour, rather than owing to any merits of my own. I therefore give thanks first to the Good Lord and then to you ladies, now that the time has come to lay down my pen and put my exhausted hand to rest. But I cannot allow them to rest before I have replied briefly to certain small matters—unspoken questions, as it were—that some of you ladies, or others, might raise, not that I am by any means of the opinion that such questions deserve special prominence, though I do recall not having addressed them at all in the opening to the fourth day.

Conceivably some of you ladies will observe that in writing these stories I have made a little too free, occasionally putting into my ladies' mouths, and frequently having them listen to, things that no reputable woman should say or hear. This I deny: nothing is too unseemly for utterance in polite company if it is delivered in polite language—and it seems to me I found the proper tone. But let us suppose it is as you say, I have no intention of getting into an argument with you—you would be sure to win. I can readily summon up any number of reasons to explain what I have done. To begin with, supposing there *were* anything off-colour in any of the stories; the nature of those stories required it, and any reasonable person considering the matter objectively would readily grant that there was no other way in which I could have told them without distorting them out of their proper form. And what if there were some tiny hint of ribaldry, the odd little word that perhaps might ill become your dyed-in-the-wool prude?—for that sort of woman sets greater store by words than by deeds and takes greater pains to appear virtuous than to be so. I still maintain that there was nothing improper in my writing such things,

any more than there is in men and women coming out all day long with words like 'hole', 'peg', 'pestle and mortar', and so forth.

Besides, my pen should be accorded no smaller licence than is granted to the brush of the painter who attracts no criticism—at any rate, no justified criticism—if he shows Saint Michael piercing the serpent with a sword or lance, and Saint George striking the dragon here, there, and everywhere, and, what is more, if he portrays Christ as a male and Eve as a female; why, he will stick sometimes a single nail, sometimes two, through the feet of the One who was ready to die for the salvation of human kind, to fasten Him to the cross.

It is perfectly obvious, furthermore, that these discussions were not held in church, where all speech has to conform to purity of heart and chastity of language—for all that, within those hallowed precincts you will come across plenty of stories considerably more scurrilous than mine. Nor were they held in the Philosophy Schools, in which virtue is no less requisite than elsewhere; nor were the participants clergymen or philosophers. The discourses were held in gardens, places devoted to pleasure, and the participants were young people, though not immature nor readily influenced by stories; and the times were such that no offence was given by people—highly respectable folk—who went about with a pair of breeches wrapped about their heads as a precaution. Now whether those stories, for what they are worth (indeed whether anything of any description) prove wholesome or noxious depends entirely on the hearer. We know that wine is highly beneficial to sound constitutions—we have it on the authority of Messrs Bacchus and Silenus, to name only two—but it is harmful to those with fever. Are we going to condemn it because it injures the ague-ridden? And fire, fire is undeniably an asset, indeed vital to human life. Are we going to condemn it because it burns down houses and villages and entire cities? Again, weapons safeguard those who wish to live in peace, but they also slay people all too often, and not because those weapons are evil—the evil resides in those setting hand to them. To the corrupt mind nothing is pure: and just as the corrupt derive no profit from virtuous conversation, so the virtuous cannot be corrupted

by a touch of wantonness, any more than the sun's rays or the beauties of heaven may be contaminated by mud or earthy squalor. What books, what words, what letters are vested with greater holiness, excellence, and dignity than those of Holy Scripture? And yet plenty of people have put a false construction on them and procured their own and others' damnation. There is nothing but will not possess an innate value within a given framework, and yet it may prove in many ways injurious if it is abused—and the same goes for my stories. If a person is determined upon perverted thoughts or evil deeds and derives them from my stories, they will not prevent him from doing so if that is what he can see in them and he distorts and misconstrues them to his ends; and should a person look for a solid benefit from them, they will not deny it him, nor will they be considered or said to be other than beneficial and innocuous provided they are read on those occasions and by those persons for whom they have been narrated. Anyone who needs to attend to her rosary or prepare a black pudding or bake a cake for her confessor—well, she does not have to read them: they do not go running after people insisting on being read, for all that even your prudes will occasionally come out with or get up to some funny things!

Some ladies will also say that certain stories have been included that would have been far better omitted. I'll not deny it: but how was I, indeed how could I, set down any story but those narrated? It was up to those who told them to make them unexceptionable, and I should have written them down unexceptionably. But even supposing that it was I who invented those stories and was their author (which I was not), I still would not apologize if not every one of them was unimpeachable: after all, there's not a craftsman, leaving God aside, who has made every last thing quite flawlessly. Take Charlemagne, who created the paladins: he was unable to make enough of them to constitute an army on their own. Numbers will necessarily give rise to diversity. There never was a plot so well tilled that not a single nettle, thorn, or bramble could be found growing amid the good crop. Anyway, my audience were unsophisticated young lasses, as most of you ladies are, and it would have been rather silly for me to have gone rooting about

in search of all sorts of refinements and gone to great lengths in choosing my words. At all events, anybody dipping into these tales is invited to skip the bothersome ones and read those that are enjoyable; to avoid leading anyone astray, each story is introduced by a description of what lies hidden within it.†

I fancy, moreover, I shall be told that some of the stories go on too long. My answer to that is that if people have better things to do, there would be little sense in their reading these stories even if they were only short. A great deal of time has elapsed between my starting on my narrative and this moment that brings me close to the end of my labours, but even so, never have I overlooked the fact that I have devoted my toil to ladies of leisure, not to the others; the person who reads as a pastime will not deem anything to be of excessive length so long as it achieves what the reader requires of it. Brevity is far better suited to students, whose efforts are directed not to filling their leisure but to using their time to the best advantage, than it is to you ladies, for whom any time is spare that you are not devoting to your amours. Besides, as none of you are pursuing your studies at Athens, Bologna, or Paris, there is a case for spelling things out for you at greater length than is necessary for those whose minds have been sharpened in the schools.

I have no doubt, either, that some of you will be telling me that the thing is too facetious and loaded with quips to have come suitably from the pen of a mature, responsible man. To such ladies I owe a vote of thanks, and indeed I am grateful to them, for they are moved by a tender concern for my reputation. Here's how I should answer their objections: I shan't deny that I'm a mature man and have often acted maturely in my day. So let me address myself to those ladies who find me immature and assure them that solemn I am not—I'm no more weighty than a bobbing cork. Now if you consider that friars, in their sermons castigating men's iniquities, are forever resorting to quips and jokes and tomfoolery, it seemed to me that such things would not come amiss in my

† Well, more or less—but please refer to the Note on page xxxiii. (Trans.)

stories which were, after all, written to raise the spirits of women who were down in the dumps. Still, should these jokes give rise to too much mirth, the remedy is ready to hand—in the Lamentations of Jeremiah, the narratives of Our Lord's Passion, and the Complaint of Mary Magdalen.

And who is going to be anxious to discover some ladies to proclaim that I keep a wicked, poisonous tongue in my head, because there are places where I come out with home-truths about the friars? We must be indulgent with those who speak in this manner, for they are undoubtedly inspired by the fairest motives: the friars are, after all, good people; they avoid hardship for the love of God, and where women are concerned they hold their fire and keep mum about it; their conversation would be a positive pleasure were it not for the faint odour of billy-goat* they give off. However I do admit that the things of this world are wholly lacking in stability and are in a constant state of flux—and this is precisely what may have happened with my tongue. I place little reliance on my own judgement—indeed, so far as I am concerned, I take care to steer clear of it; but a lady who lives in my neighbourhood remarked to me only the other day that, when it comes to tongues, I have one of the best and most endearing in the world. And the fact is, when she said this, I had not many of these stories left to write. Now as the women who take this line speak out of animus, I should like to limit my reply to what I have just said.

And so it is time for me to write my last word, leaving you ladies free to say and think whatever you wish; and I humbly thank the Lord for His help in bringing me to the end I have sought after so lengthy a labour. And you, most amiable ladies, may peace be with you by God's grace, and may you bear me in your thoughts if any of you have derived the smallest profit from reading what I have written.

Here ends the tenth and last day of the book called Decameron, *known also as the* Book of Prince Galehaut.